



## Big Screen Classics

# The American Friend

**The American Friend** Der Amerikanische Freund

Director: Wim Wenders

©/Production Company:

Road Movies Filmproduktion GmbH

Production Companies:

Wim Wenders Filmproduktion,

Les Films du Losange (Paris),

Westdeutscher Rundfunk

Executive Producer: Renée Gundelach

Executive Producer (France): Margaret Ménégoz

Associate Producer: Joachim von Mengershausen

Production Supervisor: Renee Otto-Gundelach

Production Accountants: Anna Povel,

Claude Bertonazzi

Production Managers: Michael Wiedemann,

Pierre Cottrell

Unit Managers: Harald Kügler, Heinz Badewitz,

Philippe Schwartz, Pat Kirk

Production Assistant: Harald Vogel

Assistant Directors: Fritz Müller-Scherz,

Emmanuel Clot, Serge Brodskis

Script Supervisor: Gretl Zeilinger

Screenplay: Wim Wenders

Based on the novel 'Ripley's Game' by:

Patricia Highsmith

Director of Photography: Robby Müller

Camera Assistants: Martin Schäfer,

Jacques Steyn, Edward Lachman

Louma Operators: Jean-Marie Lavalou,

Jean-François Casi, Marc Casi

Electricians: Hans Dreher, Andreas Willim,

Wolfgang Dell, Jean-Claude Lebras, Robert

Morsch, Tassilo Peik, Hans Otto Herbst,

Ekkehart Heinrich, Johan Holm, Hans Volkmann,

Ernst Harinko, Viktor Sauermann

Stills Photography: Martin Schäfer

Trick Shots: Theo Nischwitz

Editor: Peter Przygodda

Assistant Editors: Barbara von Weitershausen,

Ingrid Träutlein-Peer, Gisela Bock

Art Directors: Heidi Lüdi, Toni Lüdi

Props/Settings: Luigi De Luca, Peter Braun (Mat),

Hans Sörgel, Georg Feder, Eckehard Voggenreiter,

Bernhard Frey

Costumes: Isolde Nist

Wardrobe: Renate Zimmermann

Make-up: Hannelore Uhrmacher, Evelyn Döhring

Title/Graphic Arts: Sickerts

Filmed with: Arriflex

Music: Jürgen Knieper

Sound: Martin Müller, Peter Kaiser

Boom Operators: Uwe-Jens Laddey,

Jochen Bärwald, Marite Kavaliauskas

Sound Mixers: Max Galinsky, Milan Bor

Dedicated to: Henri Langlois

Drivers: Axel Niendorf, Volker Finnnern,

Michael Zimmer, Pierre Edelman, Hervé Grandsart

Stuntman: Klaus Schichan

Publicity: Cinepromotion

Cast:

Dennis Hopper (*Tom Ripley*)

Bruno Ganz (*Jonathan Zimmermann*)

Lisa Kreuzer (*Marianne Zimmermann*)

Gérard Blain (*Raoul Minot*)

Nicholas Ray (*Prokasch/„Derwatt“*)

Samuel Fuller (*The American*)

Peter Lilienthal (*Marcangelo*)

Daniel Schmid (*Igraham*)

Sandy Whitelaw (*Paris doctor*)

Jean Eustache (*friendly man*)

Lou Castel (*Rodolphe*)

Andreas Dedecke (*Daniel Zimmermann*)

David Blue (*Allan Winter*)

Faithful to the spirit if not the letter of Highsmith for most of its way, *The American Friend* suddenly ditches the novel and gallops cavalierly through a hundred-odd pages (more than a third of the book) in five minutes flat, as though its tortuous convolutions and resolutions were too boring to bother about. Not that Wenders is cavalier about the thriller aspects of the plot. With a proposal of murder between strangers on an underground train, and a flock of gulls menacing the window ('It's starting up again, after three months') where Jonathan broods over the mysterious revival of his sentence of death, he cheerfully plays the Hitchcock-Highsmith game; and both murder sequences are classics of their kind, the first coolly absurd with the tyro assassin's gun persisting in protruding from his raincoat pocket, a closed circuit TV screen observing his every move, and an escalator refusing to co-operate by running in the wrong direction, and the second absurdly chilling with automatic doors snapping shut at the wrong psychological moment and a flurry of mismanagements eventually leading to the desired result.

Giving and taking with both hands, as it were, Wenders creates an irreproachable *film noir* ambience (with Robby Müller's camerawork conjuring a superbly unsettling tension out of the polythene-wrapped and highly unlikely furnishings in the ornate mansion that Ripley uses as a lair and which is weirdly encircled by a narrow concrete dugout like a mediaeval moat), while simultaneously indulging a series of asides that entail not the slightest pause in the film's stride (malicious digs at television; affectionate *hommages* to the cinema's past and less tolerant references to its present state; nostalgic gags like the snatch of accordion music abruptly cut off when *les toits de Paris* prove to be high-rise construction sites).

Beneath all this, however, Wenders' preoccupation lies in another direction, in a continuation of his perennial exploration of the parlous and ultimately unsatisfactory nature of male friendships, that makes *The American Friend* much more a Wenders than a Hitchcockian (or even Highsmithian) film. A transference does indeed take place, but a transference of innocence as much as of guilt. First seen humming a Woody Guthrie ballad in a Stetson hat ('What's wrong with a cowboy in Hamburg?'), Ripley is characterised as the quintessential Western loner, camping amid the debris of metropolitan civilisation (Wurlitzer organ, billiard table, camera with which he photographs his own solitude) and obsessively confiding his death-wish intuition of annihilation to a tape recorder ('There's nothing to fear but fear itself. I know less and less about who I am or who anybody else is').

The movement of the film is governed by his dual attraction to Jonathan as, on the one hand, an alter ego, a man already assured of the death he obscurely desires, and on the other, as his exact opposite: an innocent, an average civilised man comfortably ensconced in the bosom of his family home. Paradoxically, however, this movement of attraction can only begin when Ripley has destroyed Jonathan's innocence by turning him into a hired killer and the latter can no longer adopt the stance of moral superiority implied by his remark when they first met ('Yes, I've heard of you'); but by that very action, as Ripley himself recognises ('I would like to be your friend, but friendship isn't possible'), he has already begun the transformation of Jonathan into an other.

Stefan Lennert (*auctioneer*)  
Rudolf Schündler (*Gantner*)  
Gerty Molzen (*old lady*)  
Heinz Joachim Klein (*Dr Gabriel*)  
Heinrich Marmann (*man in train*)  
Satya de La Manitou (*Angie*)  
Axel Schiefler (*Lippo*)  
Adolf Hansen (*Schaffner*)  
Rosemarie Heinikel (*Mona*)  
West Germany-France 1977  
128 mins  
Digital

The screening on Wed 27 Aug will be introduced by  
Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public  
Programmes & Audiences

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Ripley's 'I know less and less about who I am or who anybody else is'  
becomes less and less true of himself as he discovers Jonathan (and through  
him, himself), but more and more true of Jonathan as he becomes increasingly  
estranged from his familiar and familial security. Moving, together from  
diametrically opposed positions, the two men in fact momentarily become one  
before moving apart again. At one point, indeed (although Wenders apparently  
denies having cast Dennis Hopper and Bruno Ganz for any physical  
resemblance), a shot of Hopper gives one the illusion that one is seeing Ganz.  
But even if this is purely an illusion in the eye of the beholder, the same point is  
unmistakably hinted at by other means: by the magic lantern whose single  
image distorts to two as Jonathan fiddles with the lens; by the toy Ripley gives  
to Jonathan, in which two superimposed images become one; above all by the  
matching shots of Jonathan and Ripley in the former's workshop, with  
Jonathan squaring up a picture-frame and holding it so that it frames him  
diagonally, while Ripley (half a man trying to become whole like Jonathan) later  
unconsciously repeats the identical gesture with half of a broken frame.

Tom Milne, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, January 1978

### Wim Wenders on 'The American Friend'

*You started making The American Friend in a very anti-American frame of mind,  
yet it's now being acclaimed as a homage to the American cinema.*

I suppose it's both. The film is really dialectical in its attitude to the American  
cinema: it's full of love and full of hatred, but it has not become a film that has  
found a way out of this antagonism. So Ozu is still the myth behind it.

*To separate the love from the hate, was it pure chance that so many of your  
cast were American directors who were also victims of the American system?*

That was no accident. It would probably be too much to call them outcasts,  
but they were always being fought by the system. I think all three of them  
(Dennis Hopper, Samuel Fuller, Nicholas Ray) represent a certain *cinéma  
d'auteur* in America. Another thing about using directors as actors: they were  
the best colleagues I've ever had. They never behaved like actors: they  
behaved like directors who know what a nuisance it is if you have actors who  
want to direct.

*When you started shooting, you saw the film as Jonathan's story. Yet besides  
ending up with a title which focuses attention back on Ripley, you have also  
made him much less of a monster.*

I think he's still a very amoral person in the film. But maybe he's more  
charming. I think Dennis is perhaps not the Tom Ripley of *Ripley's Game*, but  
he has a lot of the Tom Ripley of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. Not that I think his  
character is so different from the novel. He may start differently, but his  
ruthlessness at the end... I think Dennis is as immoral in his own way as  
Highsmith's Ripley. Nevertheless, you can never reproach him with anything  
because of his incredible charm. And that's Ripley, isn't it?

Interview by Jan Dawson, *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1977/8